

# People's War on the East Sea: Is Vietnam's Theory of War Still Applicable?

A Monograph

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## Abstract

People's War on the East Sea: Is Vietnam's Theory of War Still Applicable?, by MAJ. Chad D. Corbin, US Army, 51 pages.

People's War Theory cannot be executed on water in a contemporary operating environment. The VPA did not efficiently operationalize people's war theory or an all-peoples defense during the Cambodian occupation nor are they in the struggle for sovereignty in the East Sea. Vietnam must move towards an integrated theory of war and a complementary operational doctrine. The next evolution in people's war theory must aggregate elements from theories that focus on joint, maritime, and amphibious elements of warfare. Vietnam will not achieve its policy aims with its current military strategy, because its theory of war does not enable strategic leverage for asymmetric potential on the East Sea.

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## Acronyms

CPV	Communist Party of Vietnam
DK	Democratic Kampuchea
EEZ	Economic Exclusion Zone
FUNCINPEC	National United Front for a Cambodia Independent, Neutral, Peaceful, and Cooperative
KNUFNS	Khmer National United Front for National Salvation
KPNLAF	Khmer People's National Liberation Armed Forces
KPNLF	Khmer People's National Liberation Front
KPSNSAF	Kampuchea People's Solidarity and National Salvation Armed Forces
KPRA	Kampuchea People's Revolutionary Army
PRK	People's Republic of Kampuchea
PAVN	People's Army of Vietnam (1978)
UNCLOS	United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea
VPA	Vietnamese People's Army (Modern)

## Introduction

The strategy of a people's war is an offensive strategy, using violence, combining armed struggle with political struggle to launch active, resolute, continual, and all-around offensives in all forms, turning to account our absolute moral and political ends in order to defeat a cruel enemy with a very big economic and military potential.

—General Vo Nguyen Giap, *The Military Art of People's War*

Vietnam and China adhere to a theory of people's war that evolved from the post-World War II communist revolutions. In the modern context, a theory of people's war and how it shapes Vietnamese national and military strategies on the East Sea lends itself to an analysis of emerging military strategies through the conceptual lens of an all-people's defense.

The South China Sea has and will continue to be a critical piece of terrain for the international security environment as a strategic chokepoint for the world's seaborne lines of communication. The February 2015 US National Security Strategy (NSS) continues to articulate the importance of the region and a “pivot” to the Pacific. The NSS commits the United States to freedom of navigation, commerce, and supports peaceful/legal resolutions for disputed claims in the South China Sea.<sup>1</sup> The countries that are physically touching the South China Sea are competing for fishing rights, use of natural resources, and dispersed island chains throughout the waterway. China has infamously claimed the region using the “nine-dash line” that depicts the historical and legal rights to ownership.<sup>2</sup> There is considerable research on China's use of modern people's war. The Vietnamese application of people's war in the South China Sea has received little research.

The protracted struggle on the South China Sea begins with its name. The world may collectively refer to the body of water south of China and east of Vietnam as the South China Sea, but the Vietnamese refer to the region as the East Sea. The title given to the area by countries with

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<sup>1</sup> Barrack Obama, *National Security Strategy 2015* (Washington DC: White House, 2015), 13.

<sup>2</sup> Raul Pedrozo, “China Versus Vietnam: An Analysis of the Competing Claims in the South China Sea,” *A CNA Occasional Paper* (Arlington: CNA SSD, 2014), 16-18.



deep historical, political, and military linkages illuminates a friction in approach to control of the East Sea. The Vietnamese theory of people's war and an all-people's defense appears similar on the surface to Chinese methods. However, a closer analysis of conflict and compromise between the two countries indicates their approaches to warfare diverge in context and experience. The Vietnamese perspective of people's war and its application on the East Sea must be analyzed and understood to decipher operational approaches that create balance in the region.

Exploring Vietnam's military strategy, the theory of war, and claims to the East Sea provides contextual understanding for the region. The Vietnamese People's Army theory and method of war are people's war and all-people's defense.<sup>3</sup> Deconstructing the framework of people's war theory and its application through an all-people's defense provides the potential to create asymmetry in the protracted struggle for access and control of the South China Sea. There is evidence that Vietnam is conducting a people's war to protect its claims in the East Sea.

Yet Vietnam will be unlikely to secure its claims to the East Sea. To counter China's influence in the region, Vietnam must evolve people's war theory as well as seek out further bilateral agreements to balance the area's power struggle while maintaining a cordial relationship with China. However, if China's recent military reforms prove too difficult for Vietnam to execute a people's war in the South China Sea, Vietnam may likely achieve asymmetry in the region by waging a protracted war in the Spratly Islands to set conditions for a negotiated settlement on the Paracel Islands.

The theoretical framework for this monograph is people's war theory and its tenets: political action, guerilla warfare, and mobile warfare. These principles expand and link to three stages of a protracted war: contention, equilibrium, and counteroffensive. The stage of contention is the strategic and tactical context related to the political action by gaining favor with the people.

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<sup>3</sup> Socialist Republic of Vietnam Ministry of National Defense, "Vietnam National Defense White Paper 2009," September 28, accessed July 21, 2016, <http://www.mod.gov.vn/>

The stage of equilibrium deals with forces available and the balance of action. The stage of counteroffensive is the phased use of small to large forces and action to achieve a position of advantage.<sup>4</sup> This framework is inseparable from the political nature of people's war and the government's control over the military and population. People's war theory expands into all elements of national power to include political, economic, cultural fields and education.<sup>5</sup> Analyzing Vietnam's contemporary actions through its theory of war provides a potential to identify evidence of a protracted war in the East Sea.

This monograph will use the terms people's war and all-people's defense and will delineate between the two. The monograph will continually use the term "asymmetry" to describe the relationship between Vietnam and China as well as refer to the South China Sea as the East Sea.

#### *People's War*

A theory of war developed through socialist and communist revolutions based on the writings of Engels and Marx. Mao Zedong brought the theory to predominance post-World War II after the Communist Chinese Revolution by emphasizing the people as the center of political and military action.<sup>6</sup> Ho Chi Minh and Vo Nguyen Giap adopted the theory and method of application in Vietnam. The Socialist Republic of Vietnam still adheres to the theory of people's war.

#### *All-People's Defense*

All-people's defense is the application of people's war in Vietnam, and includes complete mobilization of the Army, reserve, militia, and self-defense forces. These military actions directly link to political, economic, cultural, and industrial mobilization. The all-people's defense central tenet is the protection of sovereign interest with the full *potential* of Vietnam.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Vo Nguyen Giap, *People's War People's Army: The Viet Cong Insurrection Manual for Underdeveloped Countries* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger Publishers, 1967), 43-49.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 104.

<sup>6</sup> Mao Tse-Tung, *On Protracted War* (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1967), 104-108.

<sup>7</sup> "Vietnam National Defense White Paper 2009," 20.

## *Asymmetry*

The asymmetric relationship is not reciprocal, but the variables in the interaction that link the overall relationship and its management towards mutual interest for all parties to maintain peaceful relationships.<sup>8</sup> Vietnam seeks military, political, and economic interactions to balance its asymmetric relationship with China. This monograph uses asymmetry to describe the actions of Vietnam either through war, diplomacy, or industrial aims for a peaceful relationship with China.

## *East Sea*

The Vietnamese refer to the body of water commonly known as the South China Sea as the East Sea. This delineation is important for the conceptual understanding of how Vietnam approaches its claims in the East Sea. Based on perspective, Vietnam can contest China's claim.

This monograph assumes that the Socialist Republic of Vietnam adheres to a theory of people's war as outlined in the 2009 National Defense White Paper and it is not a deception attempt by the Vietnamese government. It also assumes the strategic objectives for Vietnam is a protracted struggle to regain the Paracel Islands and extend their control over the Spratlys. This assumption is made based on the National Defense White Paper's emphasis on modernization and industrialization.

This monograph limits its analysis of China and Vietnam relations from 1979 to 2016. Sino-Vietnamese conflicts and compromise are used to highlight the asymmetric relationship between the countries. The Vietnamese People's Army and its theory of warfare will be used to infer the conduct of people's war in the East Sea, but it does not explore the Chinese Army or its evolutions in theories of war.

The lack of published documents analyzing modern Vietnamese military doctrine limits the research. There is little if any analysis of Vietnam's operational art or military science doctrine.

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<sup>8</sup> Brantly Womack, *China and Vietnam: The Politics of Asymmetry* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 71-80.

Major academic writing on Vietnam slowed after the American-Vietnamese War, and only a handful of authors have generated an analysis of Vietnam's current international interactions ending in the mid-1990s. The author does not speak Vietnamese or Chinese and is limited to translated documents and secondary sources.

The organization of this monograph is an introduction, a literature review, methodology, case studies, findings, and conclusion. It attempts to capture critical Sino-Vietnamese interactions during the Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia from 1978 to 1988 through normalization and mounting tensions in the East Sea. The application of people's war beyond the border of Vietnam enables the articulation of the modern adaptation of people's war and its applicability to protect its claims in the East Sea. The literature review describes the evolution of people's war theory and its impact on Vietnam. The methodology and case study deconstructs events and theoretical frameworks to discern the details necessary for understanding regional dynamics. In the findings section, the monograph explores the evidence that indicates Vietnam is waging a people's war for asymmetry in the East Sea. The conclusion posits that evolution in Vietnam's military thinking and doctrine is required to compete with China in support of regional interest.

## Literature Review

This section explores the literature used to construct an understanding of people's war theory, all-peoples defense, and asymmetric relationships. The section details the information used to generate specific knowledge of the geopolitical situations in support of the case study and current events surrounding Vietnam's application of war in conflicts external to its borders. This review is a multidisciplinary analysis available for research to interpretively develop a theoretical and conceptual framework for application to empirical evidence. Building upon the theoretical lens of people's war theory, further expanding key terms, and discussing relevant literature creates a model to survey the feasibility of people's war in the East Sea.

The people's war theory practiced by the Vietnamese military is the output of thinking that evolved from Friedrich Engels and Karl Marx's writings on proletariat revolution. People's war and the people's army as understood by the Vietnamese is deeper than the linkage between Mao Zedong and communist China. Engels and Marx's socialist analysis and writings of revolutionary war evolved from the study of Carl von Clausewitz's *On War* and produced a body of knowledge that fueled communist revolutions in Europe, Asia, and South America.<sup>9</sup> Mao astutely deconstructed revolutionary war into the framework of a protracted war conducted by the people. Mao articulated the decisiveness of the people in war and the contest of strength as human measures through which the materials are used to wage war.<sup>10</sup> Giap, nearly verbatim, adopted the principles of Mao but still managed to synthesize the Vietnamese context of people's war theory in practice against the French, United States, China, and Cambodia.

Clausewitz witnessed the French Revolution and the military might it created underneath the genius of Napoleon. In *On War*, he theorized that people were participants in war and not merely the pawns of governments and armies. Therefore, the entire nation could throw its potential at the endeavor of war making, and that "War untrammelled by any conventional restraints, had broken loose in all its element fury."<sup>11</sup> The success of the French people's ability to mobilize and conduct war fascinated Clausewitz until his death. In book VI, chapter twenty-six, he described the people in arms and applies the fury of the revolution upon general uprisings and insurgencies. Clausewitz provides options for supporting these types of people in arms by attaching regular army personnel, avoiding the main body engagements, and the strategic defense sets the stage for the

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<sup>9</sup> Michael A. Boden, "First Red Clausewitz": Friedrich Engels and Early Socialist Military Theory" masters thesis (Ft. Leavenworth: US Army Command and General Staff College, 2001), 1-2.

<sup>10</sup> Tse-Tung, *On Protracted War*, 44.

<sup>11</sup> Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*. ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 592-593.

tactical offensive.<sup>12</sup> Socialism expanded upon these ideas and created a framework for revolutionary war.

As Marx and Engels developed the foundational ideology of socialism, they had a keen eye towards the conduct of war by nation states and insurgents. Engels emerged as the military theorist between the two. He was fascinated with the French Revolution and the nation in arms. He comparatively analyzed the American Revolution and Civil War to create the theoretical potential of the working class to wage war.<sup>13</sup> Engels's fascination may have led to a tacit synthesis of historical studies of economic and political conditions for revolution. However, his personal experience in the attempted revolution of 1849 in Baden, combined with observations of the Crimean, Italian, and Franco-Prussian wars, shaped his conclusion that a standing army was necessary for revolution.<sup>14</sup> Engels's primary contribution to the warfare was the philosophical thought that led Lenin to Clausewitz.<sup>15</sup> People's war began to take shape in the form of revolutionary wars linking policy to war through the socialism. Engels's portrayal of politics and armies links the stages of contention, equilibrium, and counteroffensive as prescribed by Giap.

Lenin's writings cover a breadth and depth of topics that synthesize the writings of Engels, Marx, and Clausewitz into what became Leninism. In 1972 Soviet General-Major A. S. Milovidov and Colonel V. G. Kozlov published their military education pamphlet *The Philosophical Heritage of V. I. Lenin and Problems of Contemporary War: A Soviet View*, which posits that Engels' investigation of military material matters formed the base for Lenin to expand his military

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<sup>12</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, 479-483.

<sup>13</sup> Boden, "First Red Clausewitz," 20-25.

<sup>14</sup> Martin Berger, *Engels, Armies, and Revolution: The Revolutionary Tactics of Classical Marxism* (Hamden: Archon Books, 1977), 169.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 13-15.

thinking.<sup>16</sup> The Clausewitzian idea that war is an extension of policy is clear in Lenin's writings. The struggle for international proletarian revolution demands an explicit linkage of policy to action in all activities, from thinking about the pursuit of war. Lenin described the tactics of revolutionary war as compromise, infiltration, money, propaganda, Aesopian language, terrorism, partisan warfare, antimilitarism, and war.<sup>17</sup> Lenin's construction upon the ideas of Engels and Clausewitz created a revolutionary war framework for indoctrination of revolutionaries around the globe.

The political education of global revolutionary activities brought Mao and Ho Chi Minh into the Soviet system. Mao and Ho latched on to communism in the face of imperialism. Mao was the architect of the protracted struggle and the innovator of revolutionary war. The Chinese communists determined the Marxist model of proletarian revolution as not feasible in their operational environment. Mao synthesized the protracted struggle to entail political action, guerrilla warfare, and mobile warfare. The theory differed in time, space, and culture in that they are non-contiguous with each action occurring through the people in a strategic defense until the tactical offense can achieve strategic effect.<sup>18</sup> Mao linked the Chinese Communist Party's policy to available means through limited objectives in the context of the environment.

While the social elite of Vietnam had attempted on several occasions to revolt against their Chinese occupiers, it was not until a people's uprising in 939 CE that Vietnam could rid itself of a thousand years of Chinese rule. These ancient stories of armed rebellion against foreign invaders imposing imperialism form a strong narrative for people's uprising.<sup>19</sup> These historical roots also

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<sup>16</sup> A. S. Milovidov and V. G. Kozlov, *The Philosophical Heritage V. I. Lenin and Problems of Contemporary War: A Soviet View*, trans. under the auspice of The United States Air Force (Moscow: Military Publishing House, 1972) 96-97.

<sup>17</sup> V. I. Lenin, *The Lenin Reader: The Outstanding Works of V. I. Lenin*, ed. Stefan T. Possony (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1969), 448-498.

<sup>18</sup> John Shy and Thomas W. Collier, "Revolutionary War," in *Makers of Modern Strategy from Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age*, ed. Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 839-846.

<sup>19</sup> Joseph Buttinger, *Vietnam: A Political History* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, Publishers, 1968), 27-37.

encourage the assimilation of culture. The blending of these cultures naturally expands to ways of war. Mao's Red Army success against the Nationalists and the Japanese proved a theory for victory against imperialism. The adoption of people's war theory by Ho and Giap was the natural evolution of the region's anti-imperialist thinking.

Communism and people's war in Southeast Asia provided a geopolitical unity of effort toward countering imperialism. In Giap's *People's War Peoples Army: The Viet Công Insurrection Manual for Underdeveloped Countries*, he copied nearly verbatim Mao's tenets and stages of protracted struggle. However, Mao's three stages of protracted struggle (strategic defensive, preparation for the counteroffensive, and strategic counteroffensive) evolved into Giap's contention, equilibrium, and counteroffensive.<sup>20</sup> The tenets of political action, guerrilla warfare, and mobile warfare that make up people's war represent the overlapping ways to achieve policy aims.<sup>21</sup> Giap's adaptation of people's war led to the defeat of two western powers and a protracted struggle with China.

The modern Vietnamese People's Army (VPA) maintains its theory of war as people's war executed by the people's army through the framework of an all-people's defense. There is no evidence of an evolution of people's war theory from a Vietnamese perspective other than the national potential for modernization and industrialization. Vietnam maintains that it is in a defensive posture but will protect its claims and sovereignty through peaceful negotiation or force if necessary.<sup>22</sup> Vietnam continues to seek bilateral and multilateral agreements internationally to bolster its political, economic and military apparatuses while maintaining a friendly relationship

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<sup>20</sup> Giap, *People's War Peoples Army*, 46-47.

<sup>21</sup> Tse-Tung, *On Protracted War*, 83-88.

<sup>22</sup> "Vietnam National Defense White Paper 2009," 20-33.



with China. Vietnam seeks asymmetry with China to keep a balance through negotiations and force that result in peace for both parties.<sup>23</sup>

The conceptual structure is based on people's war theory discussed in detail above but more specifically the linkage to an all-people's defense as outlined in the Socialist Republic of Vietnam's 2009 National Defense White Paper. Additionally, exploring the relationship of asymmetry between China and Vietnam deconstructs political objectives against the military and national defense policies.

All-people's defense is the national posture for security, both domestically and internationally. The VPA is adjusting its structure to meet the Communist Party of Vietnam's (CPV) domestic requirement of socio-economic improvement and conditions of readiness for modern warfare. These structural changes take place on a foundation of patriotism and fighting against foreign aggression. The all-people's defense leverages all instruments of national power including "political, economic, diplomatic, military culture, and scientific activities." This construct moves along a line of operation directed towards total participation, comprehensiveness, self-mastery, self-reliance and gradual moderation. The all-people's defense pillars are the defense potential, defense force, defense posture, leadership, and management.<sup>24</sup>

The conceptual structure of an all-people's defense has clear roots and linkages to people's war theory and the three stages of protracted war. The contentious national narrative of peaceful defense posture creates potential for diplomatic and military responses in response to international conflict. Robert Kaplan in his book *Asia's Cauldron: The South China Sea and The End of a Stable Pacific* assert that the Vietnamese in the 1970's felt like the "Prussians" of South East Asia.<sup>25</sup> This feeling organically weaves the theme of Vietnamese victory over foreign aggressors into a

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<sup>23</sup> Womack, *China and Vietnam*, 79.

<sup>24</sup> "Vietnam National Defense White Paper 2009," 8-34.

<sup>25</sup> Robert D. Kaplan, *Asia's Cauldron: The South China Sea and The End of a Stable Pacific* (New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2014), 54.

convincing narrative that enables the country's adoption of all-people's defense in domestic and international activities.

Potential, as a pillar of all-people's defense, creates an interesting analytic process of optimistically finding an advantage to force, action, or interconnected relationship of peace and war. The *2009 Vietnamese's National Defense White Paper* states "that military potential is the material and spiritual potentiality that could be mobilized to create real capabilities which connect to military and defense duties in both peacetime and wartime."<sup>26</sup> Potential is discussed at length in the document, but this is the only time there is a precise definition of the concept. In this monograph, the potential of action domestically and internationally provides a conceptual link to the theoretical lens of people's war theory and the case studies.

The nature of the Vietnam-China relationship is complex to frame and is outside the scope of this monograph. However, understanding the asymmetry of the Vietnam-China relationship is vital to deconstruct political and military action. This enabled the research to articulate potential for people's war theory to achieve Vietnamese aims on the East Sea. China's historical perspective of Vietnam is "anyone with milk is her mother" and that it is a "minor mystery."<sup>27</sup> The Vietnamese understand this point of view and seek a formal relationship as necessary for stability in the region. An asymmetric relationship is not reciprocal but is managed for the mutual interest of both parties to sustain peace. In this relationship, a perpetual peace is never attainable, and the threat of forceful action is ever-present. At this point, it is a matter of scale and the smaller party in the relationship must measure the potential in force and action more carefully to lead back to a peaceful negotiation.<sup>28</sup> This conceptual framework analyzes Vietnamese attempts to gain influence.

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<sup>26</sup> "Vietnam National Defense White Paper 2009," 41.

<sup>27</sup> Womack, *China and Vietnam*, 9.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 77-79.

In Steven Hood's book *Dragons Entangled: Indochina and The China-Vietnamese War* he often refers to China as the big dragon and Vietnam as the small dragon.<sup>29</sup> This is an interesting analogy to consider when attempting to visualize an asymmetric relationship. The big dragon with immense resources and workforce can protract a conflict over perceived weaker enemies to achieve its aims. Currently, China uses a maritime militia to exploit claims made using the “‘nine-dash line’” proclamation. The Chinese maritime militia is a lightly armored fishing vessel crewed by Chinese fishers who receive a political education and stipend to provide a local response in Chinese waters. In response, Vietnam created its maritime militia to counter this action thus creating asymmetry through scalable force.<sup>30</sup> This monograph will apply asymmetric relationship to Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia to determine the potential of scalable force or action Vietnam used to expel the Pol-Pot Regime and defend its homeland from a Chinese invasion in the north.

This monograph seeks to answer a question that receives little attention from the geopolitical or military's intellectual communities. The lens of people's war theory and conceptual structures of all-people's defense and asymmetric relationships constructs an analytical approach to determining the presence and extent of Vietnam's conduct of people's war in the East Sea. Exploring secondary sources translated from the primary source provide the general knowledge of historical and current events for evaluation through these structures. Vietnam's achievement of its political objectives must be examined through its theory of war to determine if it is applicable in the contemporary operating environment.

To understand people's war theory the monograph relies on the translated works of Giap, Mao, Engels, Lenin, and Clausewitz. Each author is critical to understanding the evolution of

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<sup>29</sup> Steven J. Hood, *Dragons Entangled: Indochina and the China-Vietnam War* (New York: M. E. Sharpe Inc., 1992), xv-31.

<sup>30</sup> Andrew S. Erickson and Conor M. Kennedy, “Meet the Chinese Maritime Militia Waging a ‘People’s War at Sea,’” *Wall Street Journal*, May 31, 2015, accessed October 2, 2016, <http://blogs.wsj.com/chinarealtime/2015/03/31/meet-the-chinese-maritime-militia-waging-a-peoples-war-at-sea/>

people's war as practiced by Vietnam. The research makes use of two different versions of Giap's writings. *People's War, People's Army* with forward by Hilsman and a profile of Giap by Fall for understanding the framework of Vietnam's version of people's war. *The Military Art of People's War: Selected Writings of General Vo Nguyen Giap* edited by Steler provides a contextual understanding of Giap's thinking through interviews and writings other than *People's War, People's Army*. The secondary sources provided the framework for the theoretical lens.

Geopolitical commentary, academic journals, reputable news sources, and opinion editorials are used to develop an understanding of the political situations, historical tensions, and lasting effects of Sino-Vietnamese conflict. Thayer and Amer's compilation of works detailing the foreign policy of Vietnam were used as a starting point to discover other secondary source materials. There is a vast amount of information available on the topic of China and its actions in the South China Sea. However, a multi-disciplinary approach is required to synthesize the limited amount of information about Vietnam's theory of war and its actions in the East Sea.

Historical and geopolitical analysis of Vietnam's occupation of Cambodia paints a differing perspective. Henry Kissinger states in his book *On China* that China's support of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia led to a hostile isolation of Vietnam that eventually resulted in a peaceful negotiation that favored China.<sup>31</sup> Jessica Weeks, in her book *Dictators at War and Peace*, counters that argument by asserting that Vietnamese leadership had calculated the cost, and despite isolation, they still achieved a peaceful negotiation.<sup>32</sup> There is an ongoing dispute over the outcome of Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia highlighted here by Kissinger, the National Security Advisor for President Nixon and Secretary of State for President Ford during the conflict, and Dr. Weeks an

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<sup>31</sup> Henry Kissinger, *On China* (New York: Penguin Books, 2012), 347.

<sup>32</sup> Jessica L. P. Weeks, *Dictators at War and Peace* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014), 156-158.

academic looking from an objective viewpoint. This research claims that both Vietnam and China were seeking asymmetry by scaling political and military action.

Brantly Womack's book *China and Vietnam: The Politics of Asymmetry* is used extensively in this monograph. It provides the point of departure for assessing the relationship and actions of China and Vietnam. His book also offers insights into the Cambodian occupation and the Sino-Vietnamese war in 1979 discussed during the case study portion of this monograph. Unclassified information from reputable new outlets is used to analyze Vietnamese actions to protect its claims in the East Sea. This information is used to deconstruct Sino-Vietnamese contemporary asymmetry.

The specific knowledge developed during the literature review enables the monograph to methodically deconstruct Vietnam's theory of war, political aims, and relationship to China. The contextual factors that led Giap to adopt and revise people's war theory and the modern conceptualization of an all-people's defense link historical and modern understanding of the security environment. The increasing focus on a China-centric analysis of the South China Sea ignores the importance of asymmetry in the region and the potential for scalable force and action. Vietnam is linked geographically and historically to China, and its actions on the East Sea will contribute significantly to the geopolitical outcome.

## Methodology

This monograph uses structured focused comparison to analyze the two case studies and construct the findings section. The theoretical lens of people's war in combination with all-people's defense and asymmetry develops the class or universe that form the base of the research questions. The three research questions seek to compare the outcome of the case studies to determine the effectiveness of people's war theory beyond the borders of Vietnam. The use of

structured focused comparison enables the monograph to articulate logical outcomes and avoids the chronological detailing of events.<sup>33</sup>

The structured focused comparison allows the monograph to develop research questions that are logical extensions of the monograph's objective. The approach details information from the case studies and focuses the research on certain aspects important to the exploration of Vietnam's people's war theory.<sup>34</sup> The instrument seeks to link political objective, military strategy, past relationships, territorial claims, and operational approaches used by the VPA beyond its borders to people's war theory.

This monograph uses two case studies to determine the feasibility of people's war beyond the borders of Vietnam. The first case study focuses on the occupation of Cambodia by Vietnam from 1978-1988. The Vietnam-Cambodian War is explored because Vietnam invades a foreign territory, overthrows the government, emplaces a friendly government, defends its border from a Chinese invasion, and conducts counter-insurgency operations throughout. This case study has complex social, political, military, and historical data points in its application of Vietnam's capability to conduct war. The second case study focuses on the Sino-Vietnamese conflict on the East Sea from 2011-2016. This case study is used to determine the extent of people's war in the East Sea and the applicability of this theory of war beyond a country's borders. These case studies are analyzed using three standardized research questions.

The instrument for this monograph consists of three standardized research questions grounded in the theoretical lens.<sup>35</sup> By determining the CPV political objectives for the occupation of Cambodia and the current situation in the East Sea, the research seeks to link policy aims to people's war theory. Analyzing the military strategy of all-people's defense in both case studies

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<sup>33</sup> Alexander L. George and Andrew Bennet. *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences* (Cambridge: Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, 2005), 67-69.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 71.

determines Vietnam's potential for success in conflict. The military strategy contains the operational approaches to detect the defense posture of Vietnam on the East Sea. Examining the Sino-Vietnamese relationship for each case study highlights the tension in asymmetric dynamics.

This monograph anticipates that the execution of people's war beyond the borders of Vietnam cannot achieve certain political objectives. However, it allows the CPV and VPA to methodically calculate political action, force and action, and positions of advantage to maintain an asymmetric relationship with China. The East Sea remains critical as an international sea line of communication, and it mutually benefits the Sino-Vietnamese relationship. If Vietnam's political objectives diverge from the peace negotiations and outcomes detailed in the 2009 National Defense White Paper, the military requires an evolution in its theory of war.

The theoretical, conceptual, and empirical frameworks the monograph uses to develop general knowledge and specific knowledge for analysis through the structured focused comparison derived from secondary sources. Secondary sources in the form of translated writings of military theorists are used to understand people's war. The translated Socialist Republic of Vietnam's 2009 National Defense White Paper is used to understand the all-people's defense strategy. It also provides insight into the political objectives and how the military articulates operational approaches. Geopolitical conditions for conflict in Cambodia and the East Sea pulls from secondary sources ranging from op-editorials in international newspapers, academic journals, and historical accounts of the conflict.

The data is evaluated using the key terms and framework of people's war theory, all-people's defense, and asymmetry. The information developed through the theoretical lens filters through the research questions. The research questions construct knowledge that intersects with the three possible hypotheses confirming or disproving the monograph's anticipated findings.

The structured focused comparison methodology applied to the Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia from 1978-1988 and events on the East Sea from 2011-2016 facilitates the objective of this monograph. Determining if people's war theory is exportable to protect territorial claims beyond internationally recognized boundaries builds an argument for the intellectual aggregation for doctrinal adaptations to the VPA's theory of war. The three standardized research questions give the monograph the objective standpoint to explore the hypotheses and potential future research. This methodology avoids the use of a single analogy for knowledge construction by methodically expanding the analysis of Vietnam's asymmetric role in Southeast Asia.

## Case 1: Vietnam-Cambodian War 1978-1988

The Vietnam-Cambodian War from 1978-1988 provides the first example of Vietnam exporting its theory of war to another country and amongst an ethnically dissimilar population. The political and military tensions that led to the invasion of Cambodia (Democratic Kampuchea) on 25 December 1978 are complex and buried in a historical context that is outside the scope of this monograph. The research attempts to highlight significant historical tensions, political objectives, military strategies, legal claims, and the operational approach of Hanoi as it sought to bring an end to Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge regime.

### **Overview of Case**

The historical tensions between Cambodia and Vietnam are ancient and reflect in the enmity the Khmer Rouge held for the Communist Vietnamese Party (CVP). Pol Pot adopted a form of communism termed "hyper-Maoism" by Stephen Morris in his book *Why Vietnam Invaded Cambodia: Political Culture and the Causes of War*. This ideology, fused with political and cultural motivations, constructed a domestic and international narrative of anti-inferiority. This passionate response created a paranoid delusion to throw off the shackles of inferiority by purging Cambodia of non-ethnic Khmers and convinced Pol Pot that his armed forces could defeat any



foreign invader.<sup>36</sup> Vietnam harbored mixed feelings about its strategy towards Cambodia. In 1975, Hanoi had toppled Saigon and renamed it Ho Chi Minh City. The CPV was reunifying the country and recovering from twenty-nine years of protracted war.

Vietnam was compelled to consolidate its territorial claims over holdings of the former South Vietnamese government. These claims included islands in the East Sea and the Gulf of Thailand. The first and second Indo-China Wars had frozen the tensions over territories for China, Vietnam, and Cambodia.<sup>37</sup> The Khmer Rouge, after taking power in 1975, quickly moved to secure Phu Quoc Island, a territory also claimed by Vietnam. Hanoi responded by conducting an attack on Poulo Wai Island, demonstrating the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) resolve to protect territorial claims. This episode ended with a negotiated peace between the newly formed governments.<sup>38</sup> The enforcement of claims on territories was the first step for Vietnam and Cambodia to separate themselves from China and the Soviet Union.

As Pol Pot and the CPV marched towards open conflict, political jockeying occurred in the background. Pol Pot looked to continue his patronage from China in a secret meeting with Mao. In this session, he sought to form an alliance to check Vietnamese power on the Indochina peninsula and avoid the consolidation of an Indochina Communist Federation led by Hanoi.<sup>39</sup> China attempted to retain Vietnam as a tribute state and warned it against close ties with the Soviet Union. Le Duan, the VCP secretary, rejected the Chinese hegemonic narrative used to describe Soviet intentions.<sup>40</sup> Vietnam was indeed seeking an Indochina Federation to pool peninsula resources and

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<sup>36</sup> Stephen J. Morris, *Why Vietnam Invaded Cambodia: Political Culture and the Causes of War* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 16-17.

<sup>37</sup> Nayan Chanda, *Brother Enemy: The War After the War A History of Indochina Since the Fall of Saigon* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1986), 10-13.

<sup>38</sup> Edward C. O'Dowd, *Chinese Military Strategy in the Third Indochina War: The Last Maoist War* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 34. Both Countries retained their holdings Phu Quoc Island to the Vietnamese and Poulo Wai Island to the Cambodians.

<sup>39</sup> Chanda, *Brother Enemy*, 17-18.

<sup>40</sup> O'Dowd, *Chinese Military Strategy in the Third Indochina War*, 35.

territory, but the ascent of the Khmer Rouge emplaced a hostile government unfavorable to Hanoi.<sup>41</sup> These points of tension only magnified themselves as Hanoi and Moscow grew closer through economic, political, and military ties.

The Soviet Union desired military bases in South East Asia that supported its projection of power. This strategic tie garnered Moscow's position to balance US efforts in the region and provided Vietnam with a commercial source to offset unification and operational cost.<sup>42</sup> The end of the US-Vietnam War redefined the US's role in Southeast Asia. Relations with China under President Nixon improved the anti-imperialist narrative, but China saw the encirclement of its territory by the Soviets as a threat to its influence.<sup>43</sup> The world powers sought to maintain or establish the authority to affect the region. Power along the East Sea created asymmetry in the international security environment and was played out by proxies.

From 1976-1977 the Khmer Rouge began its removal of ethnic Vietnamese from the eastern border region. They paired this with their continued genocide of ideological opponents and the non-Khmer ethnic population.<sup>44</sup> The humanitarian crisis continued to grow until the PAVN invasion in 1978. Pa Chileng, a Cambodian refugee, details in his memoir *Escaping the Khmer Rouge*, how a Khmer Rouge group entered his village, murdered his two-year-old son by throwing him against a tree and slitting his wife's throat as she fought to hold her dying child. Pa was beaten and left for dead only to escape to a refugee camp along the Cambodian-Vietnam border.<sup>45</sup> A significant period of human suffering was taking place and forms an engaging narrative to support Vietnamese intervention, but further analysis reveals the aims of Hanoi.

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<sup>41</sup> Morris, *Why Vietnam Invaded Cambodia*, 66-67.

<sup>42</sup> Morris, *Why Vietnam Invaded Cambodia*, 219.

<sup>43</sup> Chanda, *Brother Enemy*, 133-135.

<sup>44</sup> O'Dowd, *Chinese Military Strategy in the Third Indochina War*, 35.

<sup>45</sup> Pa Chileng and Carol A. Mortland, *A Cambodian Memoir: Escaping the Khmer Rouge* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2005), 151.

In 1977 the Khmer Rouge conducted a series of attacks on the border with southern Vietnam, specifically An Giang, Chau Doc, and Ty Ninh provinces, killing civilians, overrunning military outposts, and burning villages. La Duan struggled to understand the calculus of Pol Pot and extended diplomatic efforts many times during the year. The Vietnamese intensified operations around the border and launched a limited offensive into Svay Rieng, Cambodia to destroy Khmer Rouge bases. The PAVN withdrew quickly, and the CPV downplayed the raid to the international media; however, it was a direct message to Pol Pot on the resolve of Hanoi.<sup>46</sup> During this period the PAVN established an anti-Khmer Rouge group amongst Cambodian refugees along the border to conduct guerilla warfare. The Kampuchean National United Front for National Salvation (KNUFNS) formed and was used to put a Cambodian face on the political and military efforts during the 1978 invasion.<sup>47</sup> On 31 December 1977 Pol Pot broke diplomatic relations with Vietnam.<sup>48</sup> Hanoi redefined its policy aims, reorganizing the stage of contention and equilibrium.

Early 1978 saw a series of secret meetings conducted by the CPV Politburo to consider the Cambodian question. Pol Pot's announcement and a less than productive meeting with China led the Politburo to believe China was preparing for war. The PAVN increased its messaging for resistance along the border and training of the KNUFNS armed forces (KNUFNSAF).<sup>49</sup> The CPV started to detain ethnic Chinese in large numbers and halted diplomatic attempts with Cambodia in the summer.<sup>50</sup> The Politburo saw Pol Pot as a proxy and authorized a military offensive to emplace a friendly government. Cambodia was not idle and was amassing support from China and North Korea. The PAVN began to organize for combat and transition to the stage of counteroffensive.

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<sup>46</sup> Morris, *Why Vietnam Invaded Cambodia*, 98-102.

<sup>47</sup> Thu-Huong Nguyen-Vo, *Khmer-Viet Relations and the Third Indochina Conflict* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., 1992), 104-107.

<sup>48</sup> Chanda, *Brother Enemy*, 195.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 214-217.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 232-262.

Senior General Le Duc Ahn took command of all forces on the border signaling the final preparation for the invasion.<sup>51</sup> The first phase of the operation took place during mid-November in northeastern Cambodia; two PAVN divisions seized key terrain and lines of communication in the north to restrict Khmer Rouge maneuver.<sup>52</sup> On 25 December 1978, the main effort of the PAVN crossed the border to seize key crossing points across the Mekong Delta. The Vietnamese forces that entered Cambodia were battle-hardened veterans and experienced overwhelming success early in the campaign, which allowed General Le to attack quickly into Phnom Penh, the capital of Cambodia and secured it by 7 January 1979.<sup>53</sup>

The PAVN had not anticipated securing the capital so expeditiously. They dropped the KNUFNSAF in Phnom Penh and separated into two columns to attack towards Khmer Rouge strongholds northwest near the Thai-Cambodia border.<sup>54</sup> Pol Pot escaped at the last minute via helicopter into Thailand where he began to consolidate his power in the international security environment.<sup>55</sup> By 11 January the PAVN seized the lake town of Sisophon and effectively cut off the Khmer Rouge withdrawal route to the Thailand.<sup>56</sup> The PAVN consolidated and reorganized into two types of units beginning in March 1978, mobile divisions for combat operations and nation-building divisions to focus on social works.<sup>57</sup> The KPSNSF declared that Democratic Kampuchea (DK) was the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) and Heng Samrin, Chea Sim, and Hun Sen began work to rebuild Cambodia.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> O'Dowd, *Chinese Military Strategy in the Third Indochina War*, 37-38.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>53</sup> Chanda, *Brother Enemy*, 341-347.

<sup>54</sup> O'Dowd, *Chinese Military Strategy in the Third Indochina War*, 39.

<sup>55</sup> David P. Chandler, *A History of Cambodia*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Boulder: Westview Press, 1992), 225.

<sup>56</sup> O'Dowd, *Chinese Military Strategy in the Third Indochina War*, 39.

<sup>57</sup> Boraden Nhem, "The Cambodian Civil War and The Vietnam War: A Tale of Two Revolutionary Wars." (PhD. diss. University of Delaware, 2015), 202-203.

<sup>58</sup> Chandler, *A History of Cambodia*, 225-229.

The PAVN transitioned into a nation-building role through advisory organizations starting with the heads of government through to the lowest structures in the KPRA. Hanoi asserted its influence on the new administration and growing security forces. PAVN mobile units patrolled the border with Thailand, conducted raids on Khmer Rouge safe havens and defended built up areas while the nation-building units focused on training and advising the KPRA. The KPRA focused on social works but could conduct mobile operations against the anti-PRK groups. The PAVN had limited success against anti-PRK groups. However, they enabled the KPRA to provide enough security for the PRK to establish control and allow Cambodia to resurrect after Pol Pot's reign.<sup>59</sup>

The PRK struggled to rebuild the country and its nonexistent infrastructure. The PRK was only recognized internationally by Hanoi. The Khmer Rouge still represented Cambodia in the United Nations (UN) and Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN).<sup>60</sup> These events marked the beginning of hostile isolation for Vietnam with the US, China, and Thailand supporting anti-PRK and PAVN groups.<sup>61</sup> Tensions between Vietnam and China escalated to the point of open conflict. The Chinese invaded northern Vietnam in February 1979 to "teach them a lesson," seizing Lang Son and penetrating 25 miles south. Vietnam and China both claimed victory as China withdrew in March.<sup>62</sup> The Sino-Viet War 1979 cost both countries massive amounts of men and resources. However, China failed to achieve its limited objective and Vietnam still occupied Cambodia. After the war, China focused on diplomatic isolation and covert action against

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<sup>59</sup> Nhem, "The Cambodian Civil War and The Vietnam War," 202-242.

<sup>60</sup> Sophie Quinn-Judge, "Victory on the Battlefield Isolation in Asia: Vietnam's Cambodia Decade, 1979-1989," in *The Third Indochina War: Conflict between China, Vietnam, and Cambodia, 1972-79*, ed. Odd Arne Westad and Sophie Quinn-Judge (New York: Routledge, 2006), 215-217.

<sup>61</sup> William J. Duiker, "China and Vietnam and the Struggle for Indochina," in *Postwar Indochina: Old Enemies and New Allies* ed. Joseph J. Zasloff (Washington DC: Foreign Service Institute, 1988), 171-173.

<sup>62</sup> Hood, *Dragons Entangled*, 52-58.

Vietnam.<sup>63</sup> In its hostile isolation, Vietnam faced a multilateral form of people's war waged by external actors for limited aims.

Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia upset the balance of power in Indochina. Hanoi's asymmetric relationship with Beijing was out of balance from the international community's perspective. The CPV perceived the global powers encircling Vietnam after reunification in 1975. The threat of Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge to the west and China to the north pushed Vietnam to take aggressive military action against Cambodia. Diplomacy and covert action could not achieve the political aim of Vietnam from 1975-1978. People's war theory framed a favorable outcome through policy and military action by forcibly entering Cambodia with a government in exile.<sup>64</sup> The PAVN defeated a hostile government, occupied a country, advised a government and security forces, defended its border through mobile warfare, and struggled domestically to reunify its country. In 1989 Vietnam completed the withdrawal from Cambodia, and despite DK-UN negotiations, a favorable government was in place.

What were the CPV's political objectives in the lead up to the invasion of Cambodia, during open conflict, and after occupation? Hanoi's political objective was weaved in a narrative to garner legitimacy for the invasion and creation of asymmetry in Indochina. The explicit policy aims were to stop border violence, prevent further genocide, and prevent China's alliance with Pol Pot's DK.<sup>65</sup> International interpretations for the conflict placed the blame on external states exerting influence in the region. However, the political objectives of Pol Pot and the CPV were so incompatible that war was inevitable, especially with historical enmity between the two and Vietnam's ambition to dominate the Khmer Rouge.<sup>66</sup> The implicit political objective of the CPV

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<sup>63</sup> Anne Gilks, *The Breakdown of the Sino-Vietnamese Alliance, 1970-1979* (Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, 1992), 231-235.

<sup>64</sup> Chanda, *Brother Enemy*, 334-336.

<sup>65</sup> Womack, *China and Vietnam*, 194-196.

<sup>66</sup> Morris, *Why Vietnam Invaded Cambodia*, 88-89, 229.

paired with Hanoi's hostility toward the Khmer Rouge and its centuries-old distrust of the Chinese. These converging circumstances created conditions for the export of people's war.

The diplomatic efforts of Hanoi towards the Pol Pot question evolved from 1975-1978. The explicit political objectives of sealing a bilateral "special relationship" ended during 1977 when border violence spiked. Pol Pot ended talks with Hanoi and gathered external support from China.<sup>67</sup> The CPV narrative of specific political objectives for the invasion was to stop border violence, prevent genocide and limit China's influence in Southeast Asia. These objectives outlined a measured and deliberate realization of war to extend Hanoi's policy and were not a reactionary conflict.<sup>68</sup> The humanitarian crisis gave a favorable condition for intervention, and the success of the invasion gave the impression that the aim was to remove Pol Pot and install the KNUFS.<sup>69</sup> Pol Pot's rapid departure from Cambodia and the crumbling of his armed forces created conditions for Vietnam to meet explicit pre-invasion political objectives rapidly.

The complexity of implicit policy objectives linked to the overt challenging of China's influence in Southeast Asia. The DK extreme anti-Vietnamese ideology of annihilation accelerated the CPV thinking about linking specific aims with the installation of a friendly government.<sup>70</sup> The installation of the KNUFS appears to be the typical communist emplacement of a strongman to control a weaker state.<sup>71</sup> This simplistic perspective ignores the calculations of Hanoi to maintain its asymmetric relationship with China. Dominating the Khmer Rouge through warfare was the last

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<sup>67</sup> Ramses Amer, "Sino-Vietnamese Relations: Past, Present, and Future," in *Vietnamese Foreign Policy in Transition* ed. by Carlyle A. Thayer and Ramses Amer (Pasir Panjang: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1999), 99-101.

<sup>68</sup> Weeks, *Dictators at War and Peace*, 158-159.

<sup>69</sup> D. R. SarDesai, *Vietnam: The Struggle for National Identity* (Boulder: Westview Press Inc., 1992) 133.

<sup>70</sup> Boraden Nhem, *The Khmer Rouge: Ideology, Militarism, and the Revolution that Consumed a Generation* (Santa Barbra: Praeger, 2013), 73-76.

<sup>71</sup> Weeks, *Dictators at War and Peace*, 159.

political option available to Hanoi, and it met the implicit political objective of installing a pro-Vietnamese government.

The CPV wrapped their aims in a holistic approach designed to challenge combined Western and Chinese influence in Southeast Asia. The Politburo's implicit political objective to remove Pol Pot supported the narrative of stopping violence and genocide.<sup>72</sup> The PAVN's rapid success in Cambodia brought about the end of Khmer Rouge control quicker than expected, which gave way to a decade-long occupation – an output the CPV did not envision.<sup>73</sup> The invasion of Cambodia resulted in hostile isolation for Vietnam and ended by converging political and economic circumstances in 1988. However, the political objective of a friendly government upon withdrawing achieved asymmetry despite claims of Chinese victory.<sup>74</sup> The political and military action displayed in this case study is consistent with the theory of people's war.

How did the VAPN conduct a people's war and an all-peoples defense while in conflict with Cambodia? The military strategy developed by the PAVN was inseparable from the political objectives of the CPV. Chanda states that the initial military strategy was the seizure of the eastern portion of Cambodia to protect ethnic Vietnamese and threaten the Sino-DK relationship. However, opportunity in a crumbling Khmer Rouge and Pol Pot's retreat prompted a shift in strategy to the seizure of the capital.<sup>75</sup> The stages of people's war were sequenced and iterative leading up to the invasion and through the withdrawal. The operational approach adapted to the operating environment within the theoretical structure of people's war. Hanoi prepared for a protracted war to balance the influence in the region and position against Chinese subversion.<sup>76</sup> Elements of the 2009

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<sup>72</sup> O'Dowd, *Chinese Military Strategy in the Third Indochina War*, 36-38.

<sup>73</sup> Quinn-Judge, "Victory on the Battlefield Isolation in Asia," 215.

<sup>74</sup> Womack, *China and Vietnam*, 208-209.

<sup>75</sup> Chanda, *Brother Enemy*, 345.

<sup>76</sup> Quinn-Judge, "Victory on the Battlefield Isolation in Asia," 213.



National Defense White Paper and its construction of an all-people's defense reflect the 1978 campaign and subsequent decade of occupation.

Hanoi had sought out diplomatic negotiations with Pol Pot's DK, and once those communications terminated, they focused on creating a government in exile.<sup>77</sup> This political action is a clear example of the stage of contention with the CPV creating a strategic dialogue with the international security environment and tactical application within displaced Cambodians living in Vietnam.<sup>78</sup> The stage of equilibrium or the balancing of available force and appropriate action typically carried out in a guerilla warfare construct was undertaken by displaced Cambodians. The PAVN provided training and resources to these anti-DK groups and after the occupation used the same approach to train the KPRA in anti-guerilla operations.<sup>79</sup> The counteroffensive stage was demonstrated by the invasion, defense against Chinese invasion, and counter-insurgent operations during the occupation.<sup>80</sup> A clear theoretical application of people's war operationalized throughout the Vietnam-Cambodian war.

The construct of all-people's defense through the full mobilization of the country's resources is limited in scope. The PAVN maximized at all levels of strategic decision making and tactical application. The PAVN forces that invaded DK were all volunteers and did not tap into the reserves or militias. The protracted nature of the campaign put an increased strain on the PAVN, and the CPV did not leverage its full potential.<sup>81</sup> The twenty-five-year treaty of friendship and cooperation signed with the USSR provided the financial backing for Hanoi to conduct the protracted war in PRK.<sup>82</sup> The Viet-Cambodia war did not demonstrate full mobilization.

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<sup>77</sup> Quinn-Judge, "Victory on the Battlefield Isolation in Asia," 207-212.

<sup>78</sup> Nguyen-Vo, *Khmer-Viet Relations and the Third Indochina Conflict*, 107-109.

<sup>79</sup> Carlyle A. Thayer, *The Vietnam People's Army Under Doi Moi* (Pasir Panjang: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1994), 6.

<sup>80</sup> Chanda, *Brother Enemy*, 341-405.

<sup>81</sup> Douglas Pike, *PAVN: People's Army of Vietnam* (Novato: Presidio Press, 1986), 67-80.

<sup>82</sup> Gilks, *The Breakdown of the Sino-Vietnamese Alliance*, 216-217.

The emerging military strategies used to guide operations from 1977-1988 by the PAVN were clearly rooted in people's war theory and their experience in the US-Vietnam war. The attempt to export people's war beyond Vietnam's borders and among the Cambodian population highlights friction between the theory of people's war and the conceptual structure of an all-people's defense. The all-people's defense is a contemporary solution for developing military strategy and its link to transitional periods of political and military action are apparent in this case study. Due to the integrated nature of policy and military action, Hanoi's policy aim and operational approach could evolve as opportunities presented themselves. People's war theory provides responsive military strategies for positions of advantage and the geopolitical mechanisms to create asymmetry in Southeast Asia – but it is hard to export.

What historical tensions brought Vietnam and China in conflict over the Cambodian question? Sino-Vietnamese historical tensions concerning the Cambodian question are complex. The three countries have a deep history of conflict and political jockeying in Southeast Asia. The communist victories in 1975 did not bring peace to the region. It exacerbated tensions dealing with ethnic superiority, border issues, and western power influence.<sup>83</sup> The ruler of Cambodia in 1070 was Suryavarman II, and he established the country's first diplomatic ties to China. This new diplomatic relationship supported a mercenary campaign against Vietnam.<sup>84</sup> This model repeats in this case study.

A little over two hundred years after the genesis of the Sino-Cambodian strategic alliance to counter Vietnam in Southeast Asia, Kublai Khan invaded Vietnam which sparked another two years of conflict between Cambodia, Vietnam, and China. It ended in 1428 with Le Loi defeating the Chinese and establishing Vietnamese national unity.<sup>85</sup> Centuries later, Hanoi capitalized on the

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<sup>83</sup> David Way Chao, "The Impact of the Two Vietnamese Conflicts on the Sino-Soviet Relations" (PhD diss., Georgetown University, 1992), 174-177.

<sup>84</sup> Chandler, *A History of Cambodia*, 49-50.

<sup>85</sup> Buttinger, *Vietnam: A Political History*, 44-45.

ancient narrative of Le Loi in their struggle to limit China's influence in the region. These tensions boiled over on 24 March 1978 when ethnic Chinese were rounded up by police in Ho Chi Minh City and Cholon. China viewed this as the final act of defiance by the smaller dragon and openly denounced their actions as a persecution of ethnic minorities and open support for the DK.<sup>86</sup> Vietnamese nationalism in 1978 directly linked to the Sino-Cambodian alliance of 1070.

Despite intermittent periods of Sino-Thai-Cambodian conflict or rule, the Vietnamese peasant preserved the national identity constructed under Le Loi, and their migration led to territorial expansion. The Ty-Son brothers consolidated this migratory expansion through conquest and unified the country in 1786, establishing the borders along which conflict emerged.<sup>87</sup> The northern border with China was loosely established during this period, but foreign interventions halted demarcation. Vietnam absorbed areas of the Mekong Delta that historically belonged to ethnic Cambodian peoples.<sup>88</sup> Ethno-geographic issues accelerated the disruption of diplomatic efforts and accelerated conflict from 1975 - 1988. The historical tensions dealing with demarcation created a tacit friction that upset Sino-Vietnamese asymmetry. Military action was the only scalable action to balance power in the region.

The Portuguese entered Southeast Asia in the sixteenth century and by 1540 controlled western trade with Vietnam. European power struggles played out in Vietnam for the next three hundred years ending on 25 August 1883 with France consolidating its control of the country and ending its era of independence.<sup>89</sup> The dynamic nature of the Sino-Vietnamese relationship with the introduction of European actors and the struggle for regional influence was severely unbalanced. During this period the Chinese had lost a series of wars with the British and were suffering the “100

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<sup>86</sup> Chanda, *Brother Enemy*, 332-335.

<sup>87</sup> Buttinger, *Vietnam: A Political History*, 53-54.

<sup>88</sup> John Tully, *A Short History of Cambodia from Empire to Survival* (Crowns Nest: Allen & Unwin, 2005), 56.

<sup>89</sup> Buttinger, *Vietnam: A Political History*, 55-57, 97-98.

years of humiliation” at the hands of the western powers.<sup>90</sup> China and Vietnam emerged from World War II, the Indochina Wars, and Western power struggles victorious and leery of each other as they sought influence in the region.<sup>91</sup>

Victorious after 435 years of foreign humiliation and occupation left a void in the power structure of Indochina. Vietnam and China both looked outward to normalize relationships with the super powers to reestablish an asymmetric relationship. The Sino-Soviet Treaty in 1978 prompted China to end several projects in Vietnam, exposing an unstable relationship.<sup>92</sup> By the time the treaty was signed China was already committing aid to DK. Mao viewed the USSR as China’s biggest enemy, and a revisionist power bent on controlling the communist world.<sup>93</sup> Once Viet-Cambodian tension erupted into war, the US moved to isolate Hanoi’s perceived hegemonic intention. The US provided aid and support to anti-PAVN, and KPRA forces and strategically maneuvered with China to strangle Vietnam.<sup>94</sup> Beijing’s attempt to dominate Vietnam through support to the Khmer Rouge, invasion, and international isolation failed. Hanoi maintained a position of asymmetry with China with support from the USSR.

Historical Sino-Vietnamese tensions are deeply rooted in all aspects of culture, national identity, and ideology. These ethnic-geographic undertones combined with the international community quest for influence forced regional actors into military action. All-people’s defense views culture and economics as forms of military action. Border disputes affected the economic potential of Vietnam and in turn disrupted the cultural, industrial, and political action. The tensions discussed in this section impacts the application of people’s war beyond the borders of Vietnam.

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<sup>90</sup> Kissinger, *On China*, 55-86.

<sup>91</sup> Robert S. Ross, *The Indochina Triangle: China’s Vietnam Policy 1975-1979* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 28-32.

<sup>92</sup> Amer, “Sino-Vietnamese Relations: Past, Present, and Future,” 71-72.

<sup>93</sup> Alexander Lukin, *The Bear Watches the Dragon: Russia’s Perceptions of China and the Evolution of Russian-Chinese Relations Since the Eighteenth Century* (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 2003), 125-145.

<sup>94</sup> Kissinger, *On China*, 372.

Enmity for ethnic Chinese and Cambodians drove policy, disputed borders provided a battlefield, and foreign support enabled the conflict to become protracted.

### Summary

The case study and distillation from the structured focus questions generate a specific knowledge of 1978-1988 CPV and PAVN conduct of people's war directed toward Pol Pot's DK. The stage of contention demonstrated political action at the strategic levels in the form of multilateral discourse of the actors. The CPV achieved tactical political action through Cambodian refugees and social works during the occupation. The stage of equilibrium highlights the delicate balance of force and action from advising anti-Khmer Rouge guerilla forces to developing two types of conventional forces during the occupation. The stage of counteroffensive demonstrated during the invasion and defense of its northern border was impressive. Vietnam did not establish the kind of communist ally it desired in 1979, but after it had withdrawn there was a government that was favorable to Hanoi. This execution of people's war beyond the border of Vietnam demonstrates the feasibility of the theory but highlights the difficulty of execution.

## Case 2: Sino-Vietnam East Sea Action 2011-2016

This section of the monograph explores the Sino-Vietnamese East Sea tension from 2011-2016. The case study will start with the Sino-Vietnamese 12 October 2011 *Agreement on Basic Principles Guiding the Settlement of Sea-Related Issue* and end with the ASEAN joint statement on 25 July 2016 committing to security, peace, and stability in the region.<sup>95, 96</sup> The CPV political and military actions in the East Sea to counter China's assertiveness demonstrate the potential to examine people's war theory and all-people's defense. Territorial disputes over the Paracel and

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<sup>95</sup> Carlyle A. Thayer, "South China Sea Tensions," in *Power, Law, and Maritime Order in the South China Sea*, ed. by Tran Troung Thuy and Le Thy Trang (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2015), 8.

<sup>96</sup> Foreign Ministers of ASEAN Member States, *Joint Statement of Foreign Ministers of ASEAN Member States on the Maintenance of Peace, Security, and Stability in the Region* (Vientiane: ASEAN, 2016), 1.

Spratly Islands have deep historical roots that create asymmetric tension. This case study enables the research to determine the application of people's war theory in the current environment.

### **Overview of Case**

The withdrawal of nearly all Vietnamese troops from Cambodia in 1989 brought the decade of hostile isolation to an end. However, a new period of tension began to simmer on the East. The Sino-Vietnamese relations in the 1990s fractured as land and maritime sovereignty claims came under scrutiny. Before the PAVN's invasion of DK in 1978, the Sino-Vietnamese War of 1979, or the decade of the occupation of Cambodia, Le Duan, Secretary-General of the CPV officially raised the question of Vietnam's sovereignty over the Paracel and Spratly archipelagos in 1975 on an official visit to China.<sup>97</sup>

From 1974-26 May 2011, there were four clashes in the East Sea between Vietnam and China, with the most violent being the 1988 Johnson Reef Skirmish that resulted in 64 dead VPA soldiers.<sup>98</sup> This strategic and tactical tension strained relations until 1991, when relationships were officially normalized at the Beijing summit. However, shortly afterward, Beijing and Hanoi were in continuous debate over the East Sea, the land border, and the Gulf of Tonkin. These events led to more than a decade of political and expert-level talks by both parties.<sup>99</sup> In 2008 the two countries demarcated their land border and the Gulf of Tonkin, setting the stage for the 12 October 2011 Basic Principles Guiding the Settlement of Sea-Related Issues.<sup>100</sup> The 2011 Basic Principles settlement centered on the principle of "mutual cooperation" and downplayed sovereignty claims.<sup>101</sup> The settlement outlined tenets for environmental protection, maritime scientific research,

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<sup>97</sup> Amer, "Sino-Vietnamese Relations: Past, Present, and Future," 68-69.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 69-144.

<sup>99</sup> Carlye A. Thayer, "Sino-Vietnamese Relations: The Interplay of Ideology and National Interest," *Asian Survey* 34, no 6 (June 1994): 513-528 (Oakland: University of California Press, 1994), 522-525.

<sup>100</sup> Thayer, "South China Sea Tensions," 8-9.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 8-10.

sea search and rescue, and natural disaster response. The settlement addressed sovereignty issues through “friendly talks and negotiations.”<sup>102</sup>

On 17 November 2011, President Obama spoke to the Australian Parliament to officially announce expanded security and economic partnerships. This speech signaled the Obama administration's “pivot” to the Asian-Pacific region. The President outlined guiding principles for the rebalancing of resources and commitments from areas like Afghanistan and Iraq. He went on to assert that the United States was a Pacific country with great cultural, political, and economic roots in the region. The President centered his speech on a theme of security, prosperity, and dignity.<sup>103</sup> The strategy specifically indicated Vietnam as an important partner in the Pacific and promoted improved diplomatic and military dialogues.<sup>104</sup>

Nearly seven months after the United States redefined its strategy in the Pacific and provided an emphasis on the East Sea, increased CPV discussion drifted to the challenges of China's gathering influence. In July 2012, the national assembly passed a law declaring sovereignty over the Paracel and Spratly Islands. Beijing summoned the Vietnamese foreign minister in protest and asserted it was a violation of China's sovereignty.<sup>105</sup>

A little more than a year after the settlement, a Chinese vessel cut seismic cables on a survey ship operating in Vietnam's Economic Exclusion Zone (EEZ). The international community

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<sup>102</sup> “Vietnam, China Establish Principles of Settling Sea Issues,” Vietnamnet Bridge, last modified October 12, 2011, accessed November 23, 2016, <http://english.vietnamnet.vn/en/politics/14065/vietnam--china-establish-principles-of-settling-sea-issues.html>

<sup>103</sup> Barack Obama, Speech, “Remarks by President to Australian Parliament,” (November 17, 2011) accessed November 29, 2016, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/11/17/remarks-president-obama-australian-parliament>

<sup>104</sup> US Congressional Research Service, Pivot to the Pacific? The Obama Administration's “Rebalancing” Towards Asia, Report for Congress, R42448, March 28, 2012, accessed November 29, 2016, <http://fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/R42448.pdf>

<sup>105</sup> Jane Perlez, “Vietnam Law on Contested Islands Draws China's Ire,” *New York Times*, last modified June 21, 2012, accessed November 29, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/22/world/asia/china-criticizes-vietnam-in-dispute-over-islands.html>

and both actors overlooked the event.<sup>106</sup> On 23 March 2013, a Chinese patrol boat fired flares at a Vietnamese fishing boat that set it on fire. The Vietnamese government demanded that Beijing investigate the incident and provide compensation. The Chinese ignored the incident but issued a statement claiming Hanoi had fabricated the incident to heighten tensions.<sup>107</sup> Five months later, Vietnamese fishers near the Paracel islands had their boat boarded by uniformed Chinese sailors who reportedly confiscated fishing equipment and beat several of the crew. Vietnamese officials again demanded compensation for the fishers, and again China denied Hanoi's claims.<sup>108</sup>

In early January 2014, China announced new fishing regulations for the South China Sea. The initial reaction came from the Philippines who saw the laws as a move to increase China's sovereignty claims to maritime resources. Hanoi issued a statement that China's new fishing regulations were illegal and not valid for enforcement in the East Sea.<sup>109</sup> The CPV for the first time officially commemorated the South Vietnamese soldiers killed defending the Paracel Islands during the Chinese invasion in 1974.<sup>110</sup> The CPV also commemorated the 64 soldiers killed during the Johnson Reef Skirmish in 1988.<sup>111</sup> These events were a break in Vietnamese messaging towards its claim on the East Sea and indicated a narrative shift towards nationalism.

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<sup>106</sup> Jeremy Page, "Vietnam Accuses Chinese Ships," *Wall Street Journal*, last modified December 3, 2012, accessed November 23, 2016, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424127887323717004578157033857113510>

<sup>107</sup> Jeremy Page, "Hanoi Says Chinese Shot at Boat," *Wall Street Journal*, last modified March 26, 2013, accessed November 23, 2016, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424127887324789504578383820145232386>

<sup>108</sup> Bloomberg News, "Vietnam Lodges China Protest Over Claims of Attack on Fishermen," last modified July 18, 2013, accessed November 23, 2016, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2013-07-18/vietnam-lodges-china-protest-over-claims-of-attack-on-fishermen>

<sup>109</sup> Carlyle A. Thayer, "China's New Fishing Regulations: An Act of State Piracy?," *The Diplomat*, last modified January 13, 2014, accessed on November 29, 2016, <http://thediplomat.com/2014/01/chinas-new-fishing-regulations-an-act-of-state-piracy/>

<sup>110</sup> Nga Phem, "Shift as Vietnam Marks South China Sea Battle," *BBC News*, last modified January 2014, accessed November 29, 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-25709833>

<sup>111</sup> Katsuji Nakazawa, "Vietnam Shows Deft Touch in its China Diplomacy," *NIKKEI Asian Review*, last modified November 13, 2015, accessed November 29, 2016, <http://asia.nikkei.com/Politics-Economy/International-Relations/Vietnam-shows-deft-touch-in-its-China-diplomacy?page=2>



The building political tension resembled the period before the 1978 invasion of Cambodia and the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese War. These conditions manifested a conflict inside Vietnam's EEZ. On 2 May 2014, the Hai Yang Shi You 981 (HD 981), a Chinese mega oil platform with a mixed fleet of roughly eighty vessels, began operations. The Vietnam Coast Guard and Fishery Surveillance Force confronted the Chinese fleet.<sup>112</sup> The HD 981 oil rig crisis led to a six-week standoff between the Vietnamese Navy and the HD 981 armada. The CPV reported Chinese ships ramming Vietnam's boats and the use of water cannons to disrupt operations in the area. Hanoi reported no fatal shots fired and that China's aggressive action was a violation of its EEZ.<sup>113</sup> The tactical actions of naval vessels accelerated the diplomatic discourse and tested the asymmetry of the Sino-Vietnamese relationship.

The HD 981 crisis led to anti-Chinese protests and riots in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. While most protest were peaceful, some protests turned violent, with many foreign-owned factories burned and ethnic Chinese harassed.<sup>114</sup> Beijing halted tourism, evacuated ethnic Chinese, and implemented sanctions on Vietnam all the while denying they had violated Hanoi's EEZ. From 8-14 May the CPV held its long-scheduled ninth plenum and reviewed its strategic situation. The Politburo resolved to bring a peaceful resolution to the HD 981 crisis and work with the foreign ministers of ASEAN. ASEAN delivered an unprecedented statement on 11 May that expressed concern over China's actions and encouraged "mutual trust and confidence." On 18 June Beijing sent State Councilor Jiechi to Vietnam for a "leaders meeting" where he discussed the crisis with Foreign Minister Minh. China diffused the situation on 16 July and recalled the HD 981 armada from Vietnam's EEZ. This crisis brought Sino-Vietnamese asymmetry to the brink, but it appeared

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<sup>112</sup> Thayer, "South China Sea Tensions," 9-10.

<sup>113</sup> BBC News Asia, "Vietnam and China Ships Collide in the South China Sea," *BBC News*, last modified May 7, 2014, accessed November 29, 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-27293314>

<sup>114</sup> Adam Taylor, "The \$1 Billion Chinese Oil Rig that has Vietnam in Flames," *The Washington Post*, last modified May 14, 2014, accessed November 29, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2014/05/14/the-1-billion-chinese-oil-rig-that-has-vietnam-in-flames/>

as if relations were “business as usual” after the presidents met at the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit on 11 November 2014.<sup>115</sup>

In August 2014, General Martin Dempsey, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, visited Vietnam. The first chairman to visit the country since 1971. General Dempsey met with his counterpart Lieutenant General Do Ba Ty to discuss future military-to-military relations.<sup>116</sup> Two months later Secretary of State John Kerry met with his counterpart Prime Minister Pham Binh Minh in Washington, DC where they discussed proliferation, economics, and security. The meeting was supposed to take place in May but was delayed to avoid additional tension during the HD 981 crisis. In a press release later that day, the State Department announced the partial lifting of a lethal arms embargo on Vietnam. This bolstered Hanoi’s 2007 non-lethal aid from the US including seven Coast Guard Patrol Boats.<sup>117</sup> The autumn and winter saw high-level diplomatic talks between Hanoi and Beijing with no tactical action on the East Sea.

Chinese efforts of reclamation on reefs in the Spratlys was exposed by third party observers in April 2015 by releasing commercially available satellite imagery which continues today. Mischief and Fiery Cross Reef were of concern for the CPV.<sup>118</sup> Filipino and Chinese tensions began to increase during this period, which ended in an international tribunal over the “nine-dash line”. Near the end of 2015, the Chinese began landing military aircraft at Fiery Cross Reef causing Vietnam’s Foreign Ministry Le Hai Binh to accuse China of violating their sovereignty in the

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<sup>115</sup> Thayer, “South China Sea Tensions,” 10-12.

<sup>116</sup> Jim Garamone, “Dempsey Building Trust in Vietnam Visit,” *Defense.gov*, last modified August 5, 2014, accessed December 1, 2016, <http://www.defense.gov/News/Article/Article/603074/dempsey-building-trust-in-vietnam-visit>

<sup>117</sup> Carlyle Thayer, “The US Arms Embargo Lifted: The Balls in Vietnams Court,” *The Diplomat*, last modified October 6, 2014, accessed 1 December, 2016, <http://thediplomat.com/2014/10/the-us-lifts-arms-embargo-the-ball-is-in-vietnams-court/>

<sup>118</sup> Victor Robert Lee, “Satellite Imagery: China Expands Land Filling at North Islands Paracels,” *The Diplomat*, last Modified March 7, 2016, accessed December 1, 2016, <http://thediplomat.com/2016/03/satellite-imagery-china-expands-land-filling-at-north-island-in-the-paracels/>

Spratly Islands. Beijing denied these claims and countered with the encirclement of Chinese outposts by Vietnamese positions as a calculated measure to limit civilian access to the East Sea.<sup>119</sup>

HD 981 made its return to disputed overlapping waters claimed by both Vietnam and China. The situation was nearly a rerun of the 2014 incident minus the ship ramming. HD 981 eventually returned to China's EEZ.<sup>120</sup> Most Westerners perceived this tit-for-tat challenge to hydrocarbons as a resource-motivated conflict.<sup>121</sup> However, the issue of access builds upon the potential to create asymmetry through territorial control. Tension continued to build on the East Sea and five years after the "Pacific pivot" Hanoi received another chance for strategic leverage.

On May 24, 2016, President Obama addressed the people of Vietnam. He covered a shared history of cooperation starting with Thomas Jefferson and the struggle over competing ideologies. His speech emphasized improved US-Vietnam economic and security partnership.<sup>122</sup> The trip was not without controversy; the *New York Times* reported on that the CPV kept activist and human rights advocates from attending the events.<sup>123</sup> Regardless, the communist political elite viewed the trip as the confirmation of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam becoming a "normal" nation in the world order.<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> Reuters, "Vietnam Protest After China Lands Plane on Disputed Spratly Island," *Guardian News*, last modified January 3, 2016, accessed December 1, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jan/03/vietnam-protests-after-china-lands-plane-on-disputed-spratly-islands>

<sup>120</sup> Katie Hunt, "South China Sea: Vietnam Says China Moved Oil Rig into Contest Waters," *CNN World*, last modified January 20, 2016, accessed on December 1, 2016, <http://www.cnn.com/2016/01/20/asia/vietnam-china-south-china-sea-oil-rig/>

<sup>121</sup> Jeremy Maxie, "The South China Sea Dispute Isn't About Oil, at Least not How You Think," *Forbes*, last modified April 25, 2016, accessed December 1, 2016, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/jeremymaxie/2016/04/25/the-south-china-sea-dispute-isnt-about-oil-at-least-not-how-you-think/#7f9675c57275>

<sup>122</sup> Barack Obama, Speech, "Remarks by President Obama to the People of Vietnam," last modified May 24, 2016, accessed December 1, 2016, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2016/05/24/remarks-president-obama-address-people-vietnam>

<sup>123</sup> Gardiner Harris and Jane Perlez, "As Obama Presses Vietnam on Rights Activist are Barred from Meeting," *New York Times*, last modified May 24, 2016, accessed December 1, 2016, [http://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/25/world/asia/vietnam-us-obama-human-rights.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/25/world/asia/vietnam-us-obama-human-rights.html?_r=0)

<sup>124</sup> Nguyen Hung Son and C. J. Jenner, "Domestic Politics: The Overlooked undercurrent in the South China Sea," in *The South China Sea: A Crucible of Regional Cooperation or Conflict-Making*

In the summer of 2016 the international tribunal for the Philippines claims against the Chinese “nine-dash line” occurred. China’s claims and proclamation for the territory in the “nine-dash line” area was ruled as having no legal base. Beijing took some time to respond but it fell in line with previous statements of not accepting the ruling. Vietnam delayed on issuing an official statement but endorsed the ruling, creating diplomatic tensions.<sup>125</sup> To stabilize the situation the Foreign Ministers of ASEAN issued a joint statement reiterating the desire for peace, stability, and security in the region. The statement called for “self-restraint and refrains from activities that could raise tensions.”<sup>126</sup> Hanoi’s support for the ASEAN statement demonstrated its policy of leveraging international laws while asserting regional structural processes to balance the Sino-Vietnam narrative to manage sovereignty issues.

The tension in the East Sea from 11 October 2011- 25 January 2016 highlights tactical action interdependence with the strategic dialogue. High-level diplomatic discussions sought to balance individual state influence in the region and its opportunity to affect the global order. However, the tactical events, such as Chinese ships ramming Vietnamese during the HD 981 crisis, demonstrate the emerging nature of Sino-Vietnamese discourse centered on territorial claims to limit operational capability. The Westerner may mistake the conflict as a grab for hydrocarbon resources, but the long view considers the balancing or regional actors territorial claims.

From 2011-2016 Vietnamese political objectives remained consistent on the East Sea. The 2009 National Defense White Paper states that the sovereignty of the East Sea, Paracel, and Spratly

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*Sovereignty Claims?*, ed. C. J. Jenner and Tran Truong Thuy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 144-145.

<sup>125</sup> Euan Graham, “The Hague Tribunal’s South China Sea Ruling: Empty Provocation or Slow-Burning Influence?,” *Council for Foreign Relations*, last modified August 18, 2016, accessed December 1, 2016, [http://www.cfr.org/councilofcouncils/global\\_memos/p38227](http://www.cfr.org/councilofcouncils/global_memos/p38227)

<sup>126</sup> ASEAN Foreign Ministers, “Joint Statement of the Foreign Ministers of ASEAN Member States on the Maintenance of Peace, Security, and Stability in the Region,” *ASEAN.org*, last modified July 25, 2016, accessed December 1, 2016, <http://asean.org/storage/2016/07/Joint-Statement-of-the-Foreign-Ministers-of-AMS-on-the-Maintenance-of-Peace-Security-and-Stability-in-the-Region-AGREED.pdf>

islands requires peaceful negotiations and the use of regional and international laws to mediate the outcome.<sup>127</sup> Approaches used to settle jurisdiction and territorial claims were nearly unchanged until 2011 when the XI Communist Party Congress began rethinking its foreign relations. Vietnam desired to become a “normal” nation-state accepted into the global order.<sup>128</sup> The CPV views on international relationships presented a reflection of the East Seas role in world-wide commerce.

Asymmetry is a situation managed, not a game to win, and with the growing interconnectedness of information, globalized economies enhanced the importance of the East Sea.<sup>129</sup> Vietnam is managing its relationship over territorial claims with China by maintaining its political objectives to explore foreign influence to create potential. The CPV willingness to pursue the improvement of external relationships and its involvement in ASEAN puts Vietnam at a critical point for political resolution of sovereignty claims.<sup>130</sup> An emerging potential enables Vietnam to lead the effort to challenge China on the Spratly Islands.<sup>131</sup> Political discourse in a multilateral setting produces the asymmetric management required to mitigate regional conflict.

Negotiating from a position of disadvantage over territorial disputes created a choke-point for Vietnamese engagements with China.<sup>132</sup> The Sino-Vietnamese claims in the East Sea are separate or combined issues determined by the perspective of each actor. Hanoi connects the Paracels question to the discussion on the Spratlys. China separates the Paracels and Spratlys issues but combines overlapping EEZ claims to both issues, which Vietnam ignores to avoid giving

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<sup>127</sup> “Vietnam National Defense White Paper 2009,” 15-19.

<sup>128</sup> Son and Jenner, “Domestic Politics: The Overlooked undercurrent in the South China Sea,” 144-145.

<sup>129</sup> Womack, *China and Vietnam*, 249-250.

<sup>130</sup> Son and Jenner, “Domestic Politics: The Overlooked undercurrent in the South China Sea,” 145-147.

<sup>131</sup> Sarah Raine and Christian Le Miére, *Regional Disorder: The South China Sea Disputes* (London: The International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2013), 113.

<sup>132</sup> Bob Catley and Makmur Keliat, *Spratlys: The Dispute in the South China Sea* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1997), 97-98.

legitimacy to Beijing's claims.<sup>133</sup> It is hard to compare the northern land border and Gulf of Tonkin demarcation treaties to the South China Sea debate. However, it demonstrated the political orders capability given time and a common problem to negotiate a settlement. Hanoi and Beijing must work towards a clear definition of the issue before they can move towards peaceful negotiations.

Multilateralism on the East Sea increased the time required to achieve Hanoi's political objectives. Increased time exposed the problem to more complexity as the historical and contemporary context incorporated into emerging policy aims. The CPV have claimed the Paracels and Spratly islands as their sovereign territory and will defend the right of action to reclaim or protect their sovereignty. China proved its resolve to violate these claims by seizing the Paracels in 1974 and by conducting reclamation efforts in the Spratlys. Political discourse seems cyclical as each country manages the situation. The Vietnamese are emboldened by nationalism, improved US relations, and increased military capability. If weakness dictated the approach towards the East Sea from 1974-2016 and an unchanging political objective, the emergence of conflict increases as each actor pursues positions of advantage.

How have the VPA conducted a people's war and an all-people's defense on the East Sea from 2011-2016? The military strategy adopted by the VPA deviates from the tenets of people's war theory. The explicit inseparability of political and military action is present. The lack of populated areas in the East Sea and full mobilization of the nation's potential can't be achieved. Exporting the people's war theory to the maritime environment has proven to be difficult as the VPA focused on modernization without an evolution in its theory of war or operational doctrine.<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>133</sup> Li Jianwei and Ramses Amer, "Managing Tensions in the South China Sea," in *Power, Law, and Maritime Order in the South China Sea*, ed. Tran Troung Thuy and Le Thuy Trang (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2015), 256-257.

<sup>134</sup> Zachary Abuza and Nguyen Nhat Anh, "Vietnam Military Modernization", *The Diplomat*, last modified October 28, 2016, accessed December 6, 2016, <http://thediplomat.com/2016/10/vietnams-military-modernization/>

Vietnam has modernized its military more than any other Southeast Asian country in the shortest amount of time.<sup>135</sup> Its military expenditure has increased 314 percent from 2005-2015. The VPA has increased domestic production of anti-ship missiles, purchased Kilo-class submarines from Russian, and improved its Coast Guard with help from the US.<sup>136</sup> These acquisitions shorten the capability gap and present an increased capability forward on the East Sea. In August 2016, the VPA forward positioned Israeli-made EXTRA rockets at five outpost in the Spratlys.<sup>137</sup>

Modernization and forward positioning do not align with people's war theory. Strategic dialogue of balancing tensions and growing Vietnamese nationalism loosely conforms to the stage of contention. Anti-ship missiles, submarines, and frigates enable a perception of the stage of equilibrium, but without a populated area from which to conduct limited guerrilla operations, the VPA cannot transition to the counteroffensive without China initiating the conflict. The debatable movement from contention and equilibrium are only enabling the CPV to have asymmetric political dialogue and limits any possible military advantage.

Vietnam has held 21 features in the Spratly Islands since the 1988 conflict. The Vietnamese government claims 33 outposts in the archipelago, compared to China's occupation of seven features, with the last, Mischief Reef, seized in 1995.<sup>138</sup> The VPA has effectively encircled China in the Spratly archipelago giving Hanoi an advantage in all stages of a protracted struggle.<sup>139</sup> This

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<sup>135</sup> Zachary Abuza and Nguyen Nhat Anh, "Vietnam Military Modernization", *The Diplomat*, last modified October 28, 2016, accessed December 6, 2016, <http://thediplomat.com/2016/10/vietnams-military-modernization/>

<sup>136</sup> Zachary Abuza, "Vietnam and the US Move Closer, But Need to Discuss A2/AD," *Center for International Maritime Security*, last modified June 9, 2015, accessed December 6, 2016, <http://cimsec.org/vietnam-us-move-closer-need-discuss-a2ad/16841>

<sup>137</sup> Reuters, "Vietnam Moves Rocket Launchers Towards Disputed South China Sea," *Mumbai Mirror*, last modified August 10, 2016, accessed December 6, 2016, <http://mumbaimirror.indiatimes.com/news/world/Vietnam-moves-rocket-launchers-towards-disputed-South-China-Sea/articleshow/53631890.cms>

<sup>138</sup> Alexander L. Vuving, "South China Sea: Who Occupies What in the Spratlys?," *The Diplomat*, last modified May 6, 2016, accessed December 6, 2016, <http://thediplomat.com/2016/05/south-china-sea-who-claims-what-in-the-spratlys/>

<sup>139</sup> Raine and Le Miére, *Regional Disorder*, 9.

numerical advantage and encirclement are perceived as strategic and tactical leverage when it comes to political claims and potential military action. However, some of the outposts have minimal soldiers and fortifications, and only 11 are above water levels at high tide.<sup>140</sup> The Vietnamese are contesting the Chinese with a focus on potential for military action.

The international tribunal ruling against China's claims had the potential to increase military tensions. The ASEAN statement on 25 July 2016 and Vietnam's delayed reaction to the judgment reduced tension in the East Sea. While the VPA continues to grow its capability to compete with China, the CPV conducts a face-saving dialogue to appease the larger dragon. Hanoi is aware of its role in balancing influence in the region and relies on the potential of action and positioning to maintain asymmetry.<sup>141</sup> Vietnam demonstrates its ability to use hard power in the region by holding exercises from 2011 to present demonstrating growing maritime capability.<sup>142</sup> However, the lack of population areas in the East Sea limits Hanoi's ability to wage a maritime based people's war.

What are the historical tensions between Vietnam and China in the East Sea? The Paracel and Spratly Islands question extends from present to pre-history, creating a meticulous legal argument for territorial sovereignty. There is an enormous amount of literature and perspectives guiding the analysis of each claim. The first is that legality based on the former holdings of Western colonial powers. The second is foundational to UNCLOS and focused on territorial jurisdiction. The third is a historical study ranging from 1400 to Western intervention in the region to embolden

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<sup>140</sup> Vuving, "South China Sea: Who Occupies What in the Spratlys?"

<sup>141</sup> Truong Minh Vu and Nguyen Thanh Trung, "Vietnam's Foreign Policy: In Search of New Delicate Balance," Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, last modified November 10, 2016, accessed December 6, 2016, <https://amti.csis.org/vietnams-foreign-policy-search-new-delicate-balance/>

<sup>142</sup> Abuza and Anh, "Vietnam Military Modernization."



feudal claims.<sup>143</sup> This case building generates no “open and shut” legal ruling for China or Vietnam.<sup>144</sup> The struggle to define sovereignty roots in the three perspectives above.

Former Western colonial holdings are a starting point for sovereignty claims. In 1884, the French claimed Vietnam as a protectorate along with the Paracel and Spratly archipelagos. The French annexed and occupied the Spratlys from 1930 until the Japanese seized them in 1938.<sup>145</sup> The Vietnamese consolidated their claim in 1954, and South Vietnam defended the islands until the Chinese seized the Paracels in 1974. The CPV recognized China’s occupation of the Paracels to gain further support for the fight in the south.<sup>146</sup> After the PAVN captured Saigon in 1975, the CPV began consolidating claims for the Islands bringing themselves into indirect conflict with China.<sup>147</sup>

Territorial disputes over sovereignty and jurisdiction in the maritime environment gave birth to the UNCLOS in 1982 after nine years and eleven rounds of negotiations. This document codified customary traditions and laws of the sea. It provided further guidance on territory and EEZ management. The ambiguous wording in the document concerning islands gave rise to competing claims for salient low tide features that are not present during high tide.<sup>148</sup> Regional disputes over the East Sea and its features takes on a cultural psychology and manifest itself in the form of bilateral and multilateral agreements, consolidating claims in international bodies, and individual claims of absolute sovereignty.<sup>149</sup> China’s cultural perspective was debunked on 12 June 2016

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<sup>143</sup> Catley and Keliat, *Spratlys: The Dispute in the South China Sea*, 1-10.

<sup>144</sup> Pedrozo, “China Versus Vietnam,” iii.

<sup>145</sup> Clarence J. Bouchat, *Dangerous Ground: The Spratly Islands and US Interest and Approaches* (Carlisle Barracks: US Army War College Press, 2013), 32-33.

<sup>146</sup> Clarence J. Bouchat, *The Paracel Islands and US Interest and Approaches in the South China Sea* (Carlisle Barracks: US Army War College Press, 2014), 34-37.

<sup>147</sup> SarDesia, *Vietnam: The Struggle for National Identity*, 127-128.

<sup>148</sup> Nguyen Thi Lan Anh, “UNCLOS and Maritime Security in the South China Sea,” in *The South China Sea: A Crucible of Regional Cooperation or Conflict-Making Sovereignty Claims?*, ed. C. J. Jenner and Tran Truong Thuy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 176-185.

<sup>149</sup> Robert C. Beckman and Leonardo Bernard, “Disputed Areas in the South China Sea: Prospects for Arbitration or Advisory Opinion,” in *The South China Sea: A Crucible of Regional Cooperation or*

when the UNCLOS ruling rejected the “nine-dash line.” China dismissed the ruling and ASEAN issued a statement for continued stability in the region ensuring the prevailing asymmetric status quo.

Historical claims extended beyond the early 1800s when the Western colonial powers altered the course of the East Sea. Vietnamese claims date back to 1460 CE and the Tong Dynasty. Hanoi attempted to formalize anthropological evidence in a series of white papers during the period of hostile isolation. Chinese claims range back even further to 618 CE, but their argument only slightly strengthens around 1876 when a Beijing diplomat declared sovereignty to a British ambassador. The Sino-Vietnamese claims are ultimately ill-defined and Western interpretations have rejected both as unfounded.<sup>150</sup> Hanoi and Beijing continue to research and develop their feudal-dynastic claims to strengthen the historical argument.

The historical enmity discussed in the first case study is prevalent in the three perspectives used to analyze the tensions over sovereignty. Sino-Vietnamese dialogue and conflict are embedded in their national identities, creating a political imperative to manage emerging situations through a multifaceted approach towards asymmetry. Making historical claims stronger must be balanced with a strategic discourse for potential demarcation of sovereignty in a multilateral environment. Legality, history, and Western intervention are interesting topics in Southeast Asia. A deeper contextual understanding is required to balance the East Sea debate.

### **Summary**

This case study examined the Sino-Vietnamese tensions in the East Sea from 12 October 2011 to 25 July 2016. Political and military actions demonstrate adherence to people’s war theory. However, exporting this theory of war to a maritime environment has proved difficult. Hanoi has not achieved its policy objectives of peaceful negotiations leading to resolutions over sovereignty in

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*Conflict-Making Sovereignty Claims?*, ed. C. J. Jenner and Tran Truong Thuy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 202-206.

<sup>150</sup> Bouchat, *Dangerous Ground*, 24-27.

the archipelagos. The changing international security environment's shifting discourse leaves Vietnam seeking potential in emerging relationships with great powers and regional power brokers. Tensions raised to the highest levels since 1988 in 2014 with China's HD 981 armada violating Vietnam's EEZ. The CPV demonstrated new foreign policy thinking by desiring to become a normal state in the global order. The modernization of the VPA and increased technological capability is insufficient to link Hanoi's new policy aims with tactical action on the East Sea.

## Findings and Analysis

The findings and analysis section discusses the outcome of the research framed by the structured focused research questions, analysis of the evidence, and its role in supporting or not supporting the hypotheses. The case studies demonstrated the linkage of military strategy to political objectives as determined by the CPV. Historical animosity, political asymmetries, and cultural dispersion and consolidation wrap the policy objectives in a shroud of complexity. People's war theory was effective during the occupation of Cambodia, but it lacked key elements to bring about long-term favorable conditions. In the contemporary struggle for the East Sea people's war theory is not providing the strategic leverage necessary to meet Hanoi's political objectives. Each case study highlights the complex historical interdependence of the Sino-Vietnamese relationship.

### Findings

The implicit and explicit political objectives for the CPV during each case study guided the execution of warfare. In Cambodia, the CPV explicitly wanted to stop genocide and occupy ethnic Vietnamese areas of the country. Implicitly, they desired to challenge China for influence in Southeast Asia. Emerging conditions and rapid military success led to an aim of installing a friendly government and stabilizing the region.<sup>151</sup> The CPV asserted that it had sovereignty over the Paracel and Spratly Islands and that it committed to peaceful negotiations to settle the issue.<sup>152</sup> This

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<sup>151</sup> Quinn-Judge, "Victory on the Battlefield Isolation in Asia," 215.

<sup>152</sup> "Vietnam National Defense White Paper 2009," 20-33.

contemporary political objective sets the stage for ongoing tension over the East Sea question.

Hanoi's policy objectives appear logically linked to the conduct of people's war. However, when a country only has one theory of war to inform the development of strategy and operational approaches to achieve political objectives, the conditions that made people's war successful emerge fallaciously. Sino-Vietnamese diplomatic discourse demands asymmetry to define their mutually supporting roles in the region and globally. The Cambodia case study highlights what happens when discourse halts and conflict erupts. The East Sea struggle shows an ongoing discourse designed to manage the asymmetric relationship. The primary outcome of Vietnam's occupation of Cambodia was a friendly government, but in the contemporary setting as Hanoi has looked beyond the region China is now the patron of Phnom Penh.<sup>153</sup> The applicability of people's war matching Hanoi's policy aims is questionable on the East Sea.

The military strategy used by the VPA in Cambodia and the East Sea aligns with the concept of an all-people's defense outlined in the 2009 National Defense White Paper. However, in each case study, the sequencing of forces and action lacks the efficiency demonstrated by the PAVN during the American-Vietnam War. Political action or the stage of contention is ongoing strategically as the CPV and PAVN engage with their counterparts. However, the tactical stage of contention falls short in both case studies. Cambodian refugees in Vietnam were used to build a government in exile and anti-Khmer Rouge forces, but during the occupation the PAVN failed to gain favor with the Cambodian population.<sup>154</sup> The VPA appeared to be conducting stages of contention on the East Sea. However, there are no people to gain tactical political support for in the area. In Cambodia despite, the VPAN's attempts to reorganize force structures, they could not achieve equilibrium. The forward positioning of military capability seeks equilibrium but lacks the

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<sup>153</sup> Kishore Mahbubani, "ASEAN Still the Critical Catalyst for China's Future," *East Asia Forum*, last modified November 29, 2016, accessed December, 8, 2016, <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2016/11/29/asean-still-the-critical-catalyst-for-chinas-future/>

<sup>154</sup> Thayer, *The Vietnam People's Army Under Doi Moi*, 6.

potential for action to leverage asymmetry. The VPAN demonstrated its greatest proficiency in the stage of a counteroffensive by invading a country, defending its border from the Chinese, and counter attacking anti-DPK forces.<sup>155</sup> The stage of counteroffensive is hard for the VPA to achieve on the East Sea with current capabilities, doctrine, and political environment.

An all-people's defense calls for the full mobilization of the country's entire potential to include political, economic, cultural, and educational.<sup>156</sup> Neither case study demonstrates the full mobilization of the country's potential. The Cambodian occupation saw little troop reinforcement or popular support at home. The increase in nationalism and an anti-ethnic Chinese sentiment in Vietnam may lead to full mobilization but also creates conditions for open conflict. People's war theory is ground-based and works well when a country is being invaded or occupied. However, the two case studies show that people's war theory and an all-people's defense do not provide the potential for full mobilization beyond the borders of Vietnam.

Complex historical interdependence demonstrates that the essence of the Sino-Vietnamese relationship is tension. Challenges to normalcy in 1991 continue to underpin the conversation between Hanoi and Beijing. China is resentful of Vietnam and its actions towards the global community, and Vietnam is fearful of China's efforts to be a regional hegemon.<sup>157</sup> Culture, history, and political asymmetry construct the historical tensions in both case studies. The political discourse leading up to and through each case study is latent with issues of enmity, influence, face-saving, and sovereignty. This research question illustrates a fallacy in isolating a single cause of enmity in either country and that a deeper contextual understanding is required when dealing with Eastern countries.

## **Analysis**

The research supports the first hypothesis, that Vietnam will be unable to secure its claims

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<sup>155</sup> Chanda, *Brother Enemy*, 341-405.

<sup>156</sup> "Vietnam National Defense White Paper 2009," 20.

<sup>157</sup> Womack, *China and Vietnam*, 252-253.

to the East Sea. To counter China's influence in the region, Vietnam must evolve people's war theory. The effectiveness of people's war theory appears in the fight for anti-imperialism and the defeat of western powers. However, its application beyond the borders of Vietnam waged in a limited capacity illustrates its deficiencies in developing sustainable operational approaches. People's war theory and an all-people's defense developed with land warfare in mind and no integration of joint services or capabilities. This fact had little effect in Cambodia, but its implications on the East Sea have not achieved policy aims.

The second hypothesis, that Vietnam will seek out further bilateral agreements to balance the regional power struggle while maintaining a friendly relationship with China, is supported. The nature of the Sino-Vietnamese relationship is asymmetric. China has dominated Asia for long periods in its history. Vietnam respects its positions in Southeast Asia and can produce tensions that keep China's influence limited in the region. The relationship is not reciprocal but is mutually supporting in areas that produce limited stability. Conflict is not out of the question in an asymmetric relationship, but new and evolving bilateral agreements produce limited stability. Vietnam will continue to look globally to create asymmetry regionally.

The research does not support the third hypothesis, that Vietnam will achieve asymmetry in the region by waging a protracted war that countered China in the Spratlys and sets conditions for a negotiated settlement on the Paracels. This hypothesis began with Chinese military modernization, but it was determined to be outside the scope of research. However, the tenets of people's war in the East Sea provide limited tactical advantages for the VPA. This limited effort ultimately restrains the strategic leverage for the CPV to move towards meaningful negotiations over the archipelagos in the East Sea without focusing on China's military.

### **Summary**

The intersection of the structured focused research questions and the hypotheses provides an argument for the development of people's war theory and a complementary operational doctrine. People's war theory should not be thrown out, but a careful study of the theory that integrates

themes of joint and amphibious operations must occur. The VPA could generate the potential to achieve Hanoi's strategic objectives by developing an integrated joint theory of war that operationalizes the increased military capabilities it has purchased and developed. As Clausewitz mused about military objectives and the people's passion, "the aims adopted, the resources employed, are governed by characteristics of their position; they will conform to the spirit the age and its character. Lastly, it must always guide the conclusions drawn from the nature of war."<sup>158</sup> People's war does not work without people.

## Conclusion

Through an examination of the South China Sea question from an alternative perspective and provide an analysis of Vietnam's theory of war. The US "pivot" to the Pacific and bilateral agreements with Vietnam presents an opportunity to examine an allies' role in developing a regional military strategy. Attempting to understand the contextual development of tensions in the region and how Vietnam developed and operationalizes its theory of war can shape theater engagement and military-to-military cooperation. Vietnam is playing a vital role in Southeast Asia by balancing China's influence in the region. The South China Sea continues to be a topic of debate, but minimum research goes beyond the geopolitical relationships with China.

The Sino-Vietnamese relationship encompasses a rich history, land and water disputes, and communism. They shared a theory of war which began in Europe with Clausewitz and was altered by Mao into people's war. Vietnam exported this theory of war once into Cambodia and is attempting to do it again in the East Sea. People's war theory proved inefficient in meeting long-term political objectives. People's war theory requires a logical evolution towards an integrated theory of war focused on joint and amphibious operations.

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<sup>158</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, 594.

This monograph used a structured focused methodology to generate general and specific knowledge. The three research questions explored political objectives, military strategies, and historical tensions in each case study. The findings section distilled the general knowledge into a specific analysis of the hypotheses. The methodology sought to objectively describe the role of political and military asymmetry Vietnam creates in Asia.

The findings section took the specific knowledge generated by the research questions and used it to assess the evidence against the hypotheses. Overlaying the political objectives, military strategy, and historical tension for each case study enabled the research to articulate the validity of each hypothesis. The three hypotheses convey the value of people's war theory, potential for improved US-Vietnam relationships, and long-term feasibility of sovereignty in the East Sea. The findings attempt to bridge geopolitical analysis with tactical action and realize the operationalizing of people's war theory and its effectiveness in a contemporary environment.

The execution of people's war theory in Cambodia and the East Sea illustrates a break in theory and practice. As Julian Corbett asserts, "Theory, is, in fact, a question of education and deliberation, and not execution at all."<sup>159</sup> Vietnam executed well against the French and US drawing upon the people to wage an unlimited war of anti-imperialism rooted in freedom. Hanoi attempted to export people's war theory beyond its borders in a limited way and among another's people. The East Sea struggle involves very few people and becomes a question of nationalism. Execution that achieves political objectives demands an integrated theory of war.

This research highlights the importance of a robust and committed military and political relationship with Vietnam. Educational exchanges can increase the effectiveness of the VPA in their claims of sovereignty. These same exchanges have a potential to break the Western perspective of Vietnam as a war, not a country. The politics of asymmetry in the region is an output

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<sup>159</sup> Julian Corbett, "Some Principles of Maritime Strategy," in *Roots of Strategy: Book 4*, ed. by David Jablonsky (Mechanicsburg: Stackpole Books, 1999), 163.



of historical tensions deeper than a general survey can present. This asymmetry is vital to balancing the area and limiting conflict. Vietnam's ability to gain and maintain asymmetry with China begins with its political-military interdependence but its theory of war is inadequate to achieve its aims.

This research is necessary for US military units or organizations that may potentially partner with Vietnam in training exercises or military-to-military exchanges. US Army Pacific and all Pacific aligned organizations could leverage the contextual information to build relationships. Understanding people's war theory in practice gives US military leaders an opportunity to discuss complementary theories of war and operational doctrine that translate policy aims into tactical action. There is a tacit alignment of people's war theory with operational art, but it lacks the joint or amphibious focus that may benefit the VPA's operations in the long term. The Security Cooperation Office in US Embassies could use this research to leverage continued military partnership and educational exchanges such as Vietnamese Officers attending Command and General Staff College or the School of Advanced Military Studies. This research seeks to find the potential in Vietnam's theory of war to evolve through improved US relations.

Further research should focus on the operational application of people's war theory and possible competing ideas from within Vietnam. There appears to be a lack of doctrine codifying people's war into tactical action. A detailed analysis of military academic journals published in Vietnamese would greatly enrich the understanding of people's war and its execution. The researchers should look to the four Vietnamese military research institutes: Institute of Military Strategy, Institute of Military Science and Technology, Institute of Military History, and Institute for Defense International Relations. These institutes have produced limited material in English, and a foreign language study would enable the integration of theorists like Corbett, Mahan, or Boyd into people's war theory.

Vietnam is a key partner for the United States in Southeast Asia and can balance the region's struggle for power. The VPA should reconsider its rigid adherence to people's war theory

and adapt its operational approach on the East Sea. Waging a people's war from features that are only above water during low tide does not enable the CPV to meet its policy aims. The Vietnamese are a proud and capable people with a capability to conduct war under austere conditions for indefinite amounts of time and emerge victoriously. However, a modern adaptation of people's war would enable the VPA to have a position of advantage on the East Sea.

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